

2010

Costume Design and Dramaturgical Analysis of The House of Bernarda Alba by Federico Garcia Lorca

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Costume Design and Dramaturgical Analysis of
The House of Bernarda Alba by Federico Garcia Lorca

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

A Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree With Honors College Graduate Distinction

At Western Kentucky University

By:

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2010

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a dramaturgical analysis of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, by Federico Garcia Lorca, and a reflection upon the costume design, by the designer, in Western Kentucky University's production of the play. By examining the biography of the author and the culture surrounding the play, the themes of *The House of Bernarda Alba* and the effect of the themes upon the design process are explained. As well, in-depth character analysis is used to show the relation between characters and their costumes. The reflection upon the design process further illuminates how a dramaturgical analysis can be a vital tool for the designer.

Keywords: Capstone Experience/Thesis, Costume Design, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Federico Garcia Lorca, Lorca

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Vita.....	iv
Dramaturgical Analysis.....	1
Bibliography.....	12
Appendix.....	13
List of Figures.....	13

DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS

The House of Bernarda Alba (a drama of women in the villages of Spain) was written by Federico Garcia Lorca. It was completed on June 19th of 1936, and it was Lorca's last play. *The House of Bernarda Alba* tells the story of a Spanish household in the turn of the century. After the death of her husband, the domineering matriarch, Bernada Alba, imposes a stifling period of mourning upon her household—including her five grown daughters, aged between twenty and thirty-nine, as well as her servants.

Tension mounts within the house as it is revealed that the oldest daughter, Angustias, has attracted a fiancé, Pepe el Romano, through her large inheritance from Bernarda's first husband, her father. Two of her sisters, Adela and Martirio, are also in love with Pepe el Romano, further increasing the tension in this enclosed household. Adela rebels against Bernarda's exertion of control by breaking her mourning and wearing a vibrant green dress out in the courtyard. When it is revealed to Adela that Angustias will be marrying Pepe, she falls into a deep depression.

The women speak about their lives and the freedom they wish for, as well as relationships which they have been denied by their over-bearing mother. Maria Josefa, Bernarda's elderly and senile mother, comes on stage wearing her old wedding dress and speaks of the tyranny of Bernarda and the futility of trying to keep these young women locked up, stating that she wants to run away too and be married by the seashore. Later that afternoon, a loud commotion is heard outside of the house. It is revealed to be an angry mob who will execute a young woman for

having an affair. Adela reacts with despair and passion, begging her mother not to join the mob. Later that night Martirio, after speaking again with Maria Josefa, catches Adela sneaking off to meet with Pepe el Romano. She becomes enraged, fighting Adela and yelling to wake the household.

The tension finally breaks in the play as Bernarda reacts to the news of this affair by shooting at Pepe el Romano, telling Adela she has killed him. Adela rushes off to her room, distraught. A thud is heard off stage, and Bernarda rushes to open Adela's bedroom door, admonishing her the entire time about her loose ways. Bernarda and Poncia leave to enter Adela's bedroom, returning with a cry of shock. Adela has hanged herself in her room. The closing lines of the play show Bernarda occupied with the family's reputation as she cries out that Adela died a virgin and that there will be no tears.

The House of Bernarda Alba takes place during the turn of the century or just a bit afterwards, in rural Spain, specifically Andalusia. Andalusia is located at the extreme southern edge of Spain, an autonomous community that was highly influenced in architecture by the Muslim invasions of Spain in 711 B.C. (Allen, 201). Like all of Spain, it was predominately a Catholic community in the early 1900's, highly prizing the ideals of modesty in dress and behavior. The time of the play is not mentioned by the playwright, but it can be determined through context clues that it takes place in a time before electricity and indoor plumbing were widespread. Western Kentucky University's production was set at the turn of the century, but tried to maintain a feeling of universality. This influenced the costume design in that research came from the 1880's through the 1910's, creating a world that felt historic but could be related to by the audience. If the costumes were too old-fashioned, the themese of the play would have

also become dated, even though they are still very much relevant to a contemporary audience.

There was a delicate balance in choosing costumes that were both historically correct but not too far removed from contemporary dress.

The actual village that the story takes place is described as small and remote; it does not have electricity or running water. Bernarda's home is large, containing at least a courtyard, a parlor, a white room, and bedrooms (mentioned in the text); however, it is implied that the house is not in as good condition as it once was. The weather is described in the play as arid, swelteringly hot with no relief. It is an area that grows grapes for wine, highlighting the soberness and somberness of Bernarda's home. It is a village without running water nearby to bring trade or change, a fact that Bernarda describes in a metaphorical sense, "A village without a river where you daren't dip your tongue in the well water in case it's poisoned." (Lorca, 17)

In Lorca's own time Spain was experiencing a time of extreme political unrest leading to the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The war ended in a national dictatorship with Francisco Franco controlling Spain until 1975 as a Fascist country. The Spanish Civil War was a bloody war, with political radicals like Lorca being persecuted and even executed for their beliefs. The control and domineering force of Bernarda Alba is a clear reaction on the part of the playwright to the actions of the Fascist party in Spain, and the intended audience of the play would be familiar with these actions.

Frederico Garcia Lorca was a poet and playwright, but also he was an outspoken political activist for the Communist Party of Spain. Lorca was born on June 5, 1898, and he died on August 19, 1936. After attending an arts university in Madrid, Lorca went on to befriend many radicals in both the arts and politics, including Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel. Lorca spent a

brief time in New York City during 1929, after his relationship with Salvador Dali ended, but returned to Spain in 1930 and became politically active again. He was murdered in 1936, after the fall of Primo de Rivera. It is rumored that he was assassinated by the Nationalist party or persons affiliated with the party, though an official indictment was never made. There was a general ban on all of Lorca's plays and poetry by the Franco regime until 1953 (Lima, 56-64).. It is clear that *The House of Bernarda Alba* was intended as a reaction to the violent and domineering politics of Federico Garcia Lorca's time. Bernarda Alba is often compared to Franco, and her daughters to the citizens of Spain. This was reflected in the costume design by the colors represented in the characters—black, green, and white which all have deep meaning to the Spanish culture, especially when taken in this context. As well, the character of Bernarda Alba's military inspired, restrictive clothing is a parallel to the fascist dictatorship. In the way Bernarda tries to control the dress and the actions of her daughters, this parallel also shows the relationship between the women and the people of Spain under the fascist regime. By forcing her daughters into restrictive, overly-modest clothing, Bernarda hoped to control the women's sexuality and very nature, ultimately leading to Adela's tragic suicide.

The House of Bernarda Alba is fascinating because it is one of the rare plays of this time period to have no male characters present on stage, all the action involving men taking place off-stage and only heard by the onstage women. However, much of the action is influenced by men. Lorca's writing of female characters is insightful and complicated, with each reacting differently to her “imprisonment” and the lack of men in her surroundings. In the costume design for Western Kentucky University's production, I worked to find a delicate balance between masculinity and femininity in the characters. Since no men are present in the play, it was

interesting to play with the idea of the women on their own and how the roles they adopt differ from their roles around men. The inherent masculinity in the more domineering character, Bernarda, was reflected in the costume design through utilizing features typical of men's military uniforms and formal wear. At the same time, Martirio has a different, quieter sort of masculinity, and her design reflects an inspiration from casual male fashions of the time. However, if there were masculine characters, there also needed to be more archetypically feminine characters to show a contrast, the characters of Amelia and Magdalena, for example.

Bernarda Alba, the title character of the play, is a domineering, masculine woman of sixty years of age. She carries a heavy walking stick, representing her control over the household. She is the matriarch of this family, completely in charge after the death of her second husband. She is preoccupied with the idea of preserving the family's reputation and honor, denying her daughters the opportunity for relationships or even friendships outside of the home. She represents the Francoist ideal that a woman's place is in the home, stating to her daughters, “A needle and thread for the women. A whip and mule for the men. That's how it should be for a well-bred family” (Lorca, 18).

Bernada's motivations in the play are to keep the reputation of her family honorable, and she goes about achieving this goal with a brutal force that alienates her children. When questioned as to why she has not let her children marry, she states, “There's no one for a hundred miles that's good enough to come near them. The men here are not of their class.” (Lorca, 21) The end result for Bernarda is the same as when she began the play—after her daughter's suicide, she is even more obsessed with the idea of preserving family honor, exclaiming that there will be no tears; her daughter died a virgin.

Poncia is Bernarda's loyal head servant. Having worked in the home for more than thirty years, she has watched each of the daughters grow up and offers an insightful view into each of their faults and thoughts. Poncia is willful, even spiteful of Bernarda, but she describes herself as Bernarda's faithful guard dog. She states, "But I'm the best bitch she has. I bark when she tells me to, I sink my teeth into the beggars' heels when she sets me at them" (Lorca, 19). Poncia is motivated by her sense of loyalty to this family and Bernarda for providing her with employment for thirty years, but also by a strange wish to watch the actions of the daughters—in essence watching as the house falls about her. She states, "Fate sent me to this convent, and here I stay" (Lorca, 30). She acts as a sounding board for each of the daughters, voicing her opinion and acting more in a motherly way than Bernarda herself. At the end of the play, Poncia is still working for the household and is truly in mourning for the loss of Adela.

Poncia's character is the mother figure, even more so to the daughters than their own mother. As such, the character of Poncia had to feel that she was more than just a servant in the household. The costume design reflects this in that while her clothing is plainer than the daughters' own, it is still neat and presentable. As well, Poncia's silhouette was intentionally kept more matronly, with the use of the apron as an iconic connection to motherhood. The shades of black and gray were more subdued than Bernarda's intense all-black silhouette, creating a feeling of approachability with the character of Poncia.

Angustias is Bernarda's oldest daughter and the only one from Bernarda's first marriage. She is the richest of the sisters, with her father's inheritance. However, Angustias is older than the rest, thirty-nine years old, and she is sickly. Her sister Magdalena describes her in the following quote, "...she's old, she's ill, and she's the ugliest of the lot of us." Poncia states, "She's

old. And her hips are narrow” (Lorca, 15). Because of her wealth, Angustias is the only daughter who has managed to court a suitor, Pepe el Romano. She is distant from her sisters because of this fact, their jealousy not only for her ability to leave the repressive house but also to find a husband is apparent. She is motivated by a sense of desperation throughout the play—wanting desperately to leave the household and grasping at her last chance with Pepe el Romano. At the end of the play she has lost her last hope of marrying Pepe el Romano and weeps openly for the loss of her sister and her freedom.

The costume design for Angustias was difficult in that it had to reflect that she was the oldest and the wealthiest daughter, without overshadowing the other characters. Also, it was clear that she was the most unattractive daughter from the dialogue, so the design had to reflect that ugliness that the other characters see without making Angustias completely unable to be related to by the audience.

The middle sisters, Amelia, thirtyyears old, and Magdalena, twenty-seven years old, are almost always found together as a pair. They are the two most affected by their father's death. Magdalena's name is taken from the Spanish idiom, “llorar como una Magdalena”, which means to cry like the Saint Magdalena (Mary Magdalene in the English Church). They are both submissive to their mother, unable to rise against her like Martirio or Adela. They, however, do gossip about the other sisters, helping to encourage the mounting tension in the house. Both are motivated by a deep depression at being held captive in the household and a deep grief for the loss of their father. At the end of the play, they are forced into a period of even longer mourning, further increasing their desperation and reminding them of the futility of their dreams.

Martirio is the second youngest sister, only twenty-four years old. She is perhaps the

most masculine of the sisters, standing strong on her own, even as she pines for the affection of Pepe el Romano. She does not trust men and has no desire to have contact with them, in direct contrast to her infatuation with Pepe. She states, “I think it's better never to look at a man. I've been afraid of them since I was a little girl” (Lorca, 22). This resentment of men stems from a relationship that was spurned, unknown to Martirio, by her mother. She explains what had happened to her sisters, saying, “Once I stood out all night at my window in my nightgown. He'd let me know through his shepherd's little girl that he was coming... but he didn't. It was all just talk. And then he married someone else with more money” (Lorca, 23). Martirio's name is a play on the Spanish word for martyr, making a statement about her self-sacrificing attitude. Maria Josefa says about her name, “You're Martirio. Martirio the martyr” (Lorca, 54). Martirio's tension with her sisters is only increased by her love for Pepe el Romano. Like Adela, she professes to be consumed with passion for him, but Martirio's difference is that she will not go after this passion. Her motivations are an intense fear of men and yet an overwhelming desire for Pepe el Romano, ending in her betrayal of Adela as she screams to wake up the household and then tells Bernada Alba of Adela's affair with Pepe. Martirio's love for her sister is overwhelmed by her desire for Pepe el Romano and the freedom he brings. She states, “There is the same blood in both of us, but I don't care. I can't even try to love you. You're not my sister. You're just another woman” (Lorca, 61). Martirio remains trapped in this house at the end of the play, her resentment of her mother growing immensely, though her thoughts of rebellion have been stifled.

Adela is the youngest of the sisters, barely into her grown years at twenty. She is passionate in an all-consuming way. Unable to be stifled by her mother's tyranny, Adela rebels

by first breaking her mourning and wearing her green dress out in the courtyard. She explains her reasoning for doing something so scandalous, “I can't be locked up! I don't want my flesh to fade like yours has! I don't want my whiteness lost to these rooms! Tomorrow I'm going to put on my green dress and I'm going to go walk in the streets. I want to go out!” (Lorca, 26). Adela, in essence, has watched the rest of her sisters fade in their passion to spinsters who no longer question Bernarda's control of the house. She is the youngest and the most affected by the strict code of mourning, unable to stand the mounting pressure inside the house. The extreme of having an affair with Pepe el Romano is even explained by her passionate nature. She states when confronted by Martirio, “I'm strong enough to take what I want. I've got the strength and the looks you wish you had. I've seen death living here with us so I'm taking what's mine now, what was always mine!” (Lorca, 60).

These strong female characters, confined in a house together with secrets and hidden passions echoing through the stucco walls were a great influence to my design of this classic play. The director, Dr. Andrea Grapko, gave the design team the statement that the play to her was about trying to hold onto something so tightly that in the end one crushes it. It either dies or runs away. For me, this was a powerful statement that influenced both the grand scheme of the costume design, as well as small details about each costume. To heighten the growing tension in the household, the costumes reflect a restricted and restrained attitude, long sleeves with cuffs, high neckline, rows of buttons or lacing. Each of the main actors were also corseted to create that feeling of restraint through inhibiting the ways they could move and the stature of the actors.

Mourning and loss were, of course, themes and motifs in the play that were carefully considered as far as the design. I knew that I would be working with solely black, a color used

cross-culturally for mourning. The difficulty came in creating enough differences in the characters to be seen and also working with textures and shape to keep the all-black from becoming overpoweringly monotonous. Even though this household is restrained and kept from the outside world, each of these women has an independent passion about her that is not completely stifled by Bernarda's tyranny. So, it was the design's job to reflect this sense of individuality in restraint.

Color also became a concern for me in the design process. In the text, only three colors, black, white, and green; are mentioned by the playwright, and I feel this was intentionally done. Black, as in most Western cultures, symbolizes mourning, depression, and sadness. White, however, is representative of freedom, purity, and spirituality; as Maria Josefa is when she appears on stage in her white wedding gown. At the end of the play, the women all appear in their nightclothes, white. I took this to mean a statement about this repressed young women—they are still very much innocent though their actions would say otherwise. Their outward black clothing hides a white, pure interior. Use of color had to be deliberate and thought out—with this limited of a palette even individual shades of black, gray, or white sent a message to the audience.

Green was the only non-neutral color intentionally used in the play. When Adela appears on stage in her green dress, it is meant to be a shock of color against the plain walls and black mourning clothes of her sisters. Green is also a powerful color for the Spanish culture, representing both hope and renewal as well as 'death soon to come' (Lima, 156). As such, it was in the design that the shade of green used should feel springlike and fresh without being overpowering.

In conclusion, the design of *The House of Bernarda Alba* was heavily influenced not only by the characters but also by Lorca's life and the poetry in his works. The play is a reaction not only to the oppression of women by the Catholic faith and traditions, but also was a reaction to Franco and the Nationalists rise to power (Lima, 174). In this dramaturgical analysis, I have defined how the dramaturgy of the play affected the costume design of this production as well as an in depth analysis of each character. *The House of Bernarda Alba* is a powerful, poignant play that required much thought and care in designing.

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APPENDIX

List of Figures:

1.1	Water Color Rendering of Bernarda Alba.....	14
1.2	Water Color Rendering of Bernarda Alba in Night Gown.....	14
2.1	Water Color Rendering of Angustias in Mourning Dress.....	15
2.2	Water Color Rendering of Angustias in Night Gown.....	15
3.1	Water Color Rendering of Martirio in Mourning Dress.....	16
3.2	Water Color Rendering of Martirio in Under Garments.....	16
4.1	Water Color Rendering of Amelia in Mourning Dress.....	17
4.2	Water Color Rendering of Amelia in Night Gown.....	17
5.1	Water Color Rendering of Magdalena in Mourning Dress.....	18
5.2	Water Color Rendering of Magdalena in Night Gown.....	18
6.1	Water Color Rendering of Poncia	19
7.1	Water Color Rendering of Servant.....	19
8.1	Water Color Rendering of Maria Josefa in Wedding Dress	20
8.2	Water Color Rendering of Maria Josefa in Wedding Dress	20
9.1	Water Color Rendering of Adela in Green Dress.....	21
9.2	Water Color Rendering of Adela in Under Garments.....	21
9.3	Water Color Rendering of Adela in Mourning Dress.....,,.....	22
10.1	Water Color Rendering of Prudencia.....	23
11.1	Water Color Rendering of Beggar	23

Figure 1.1: Water Color Rendering of Bernarda Alba



Figure 1.1: Water Color Rendering of Bernarda Alba in Night Gown



Figure 2.1: Water Color Rendering of Angustias in Mourning Dress



Figure 2.2 Water Color Rendering of Angustias in Night Gown

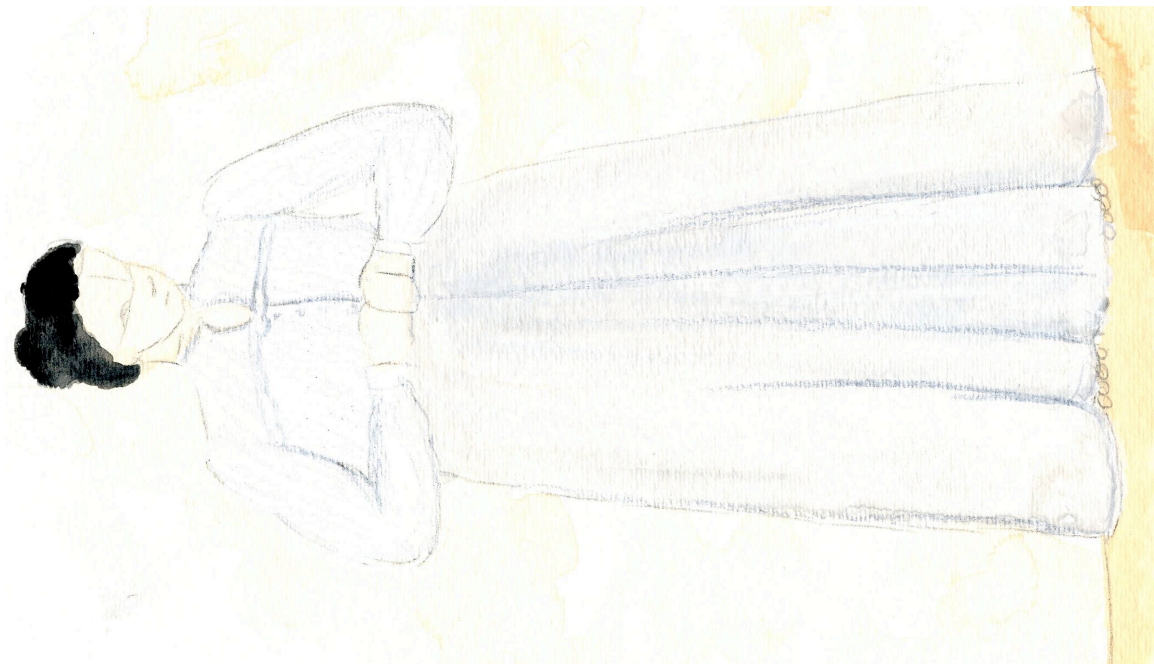


Figure 3.1: Water Color Rendering of Martirio in Mourning Dress



Figure 3.2: Water Color Rendering of Martirio in Under Garments



Figure 4.1: Amelia in Mourning Dress



Figure 4.1: Water Color Rendering of Amelia in Night Gown



Figure 5.1 Water Color Rendering of Magdalena in Mourning Dress



Figure 5.2 Water Color Rendering of Magdalena in Night Gown

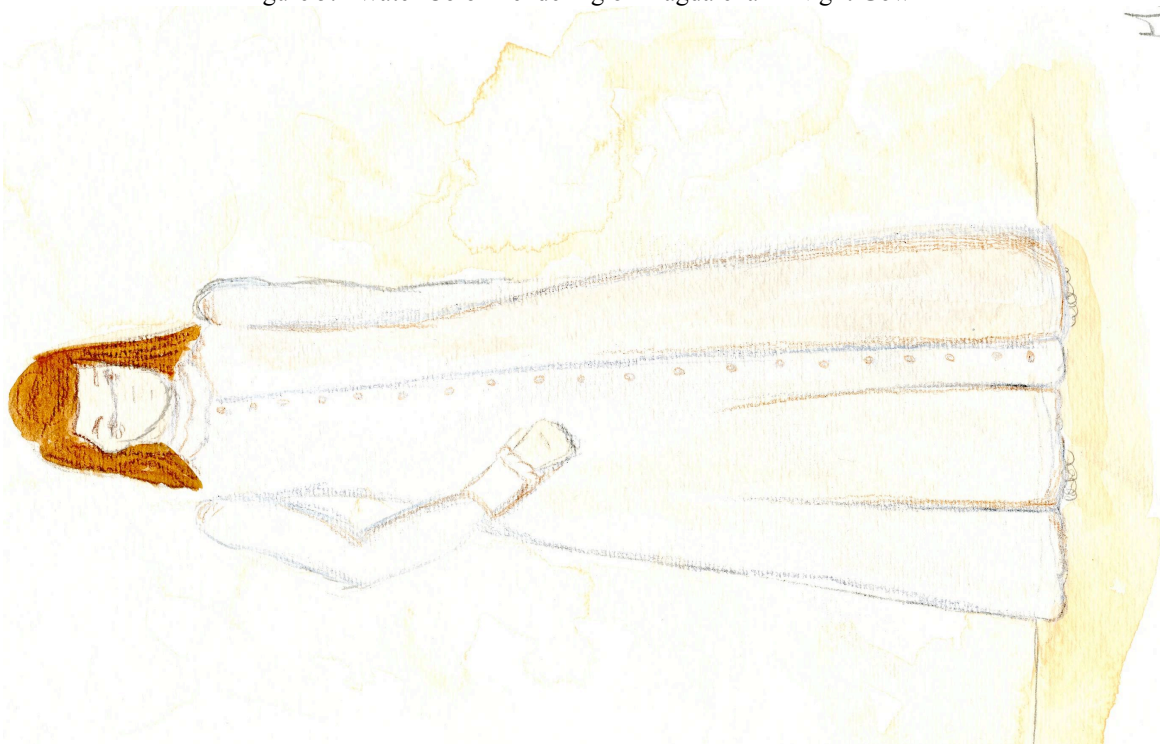


Figure 6.1 Water Color Rendering of Poncia

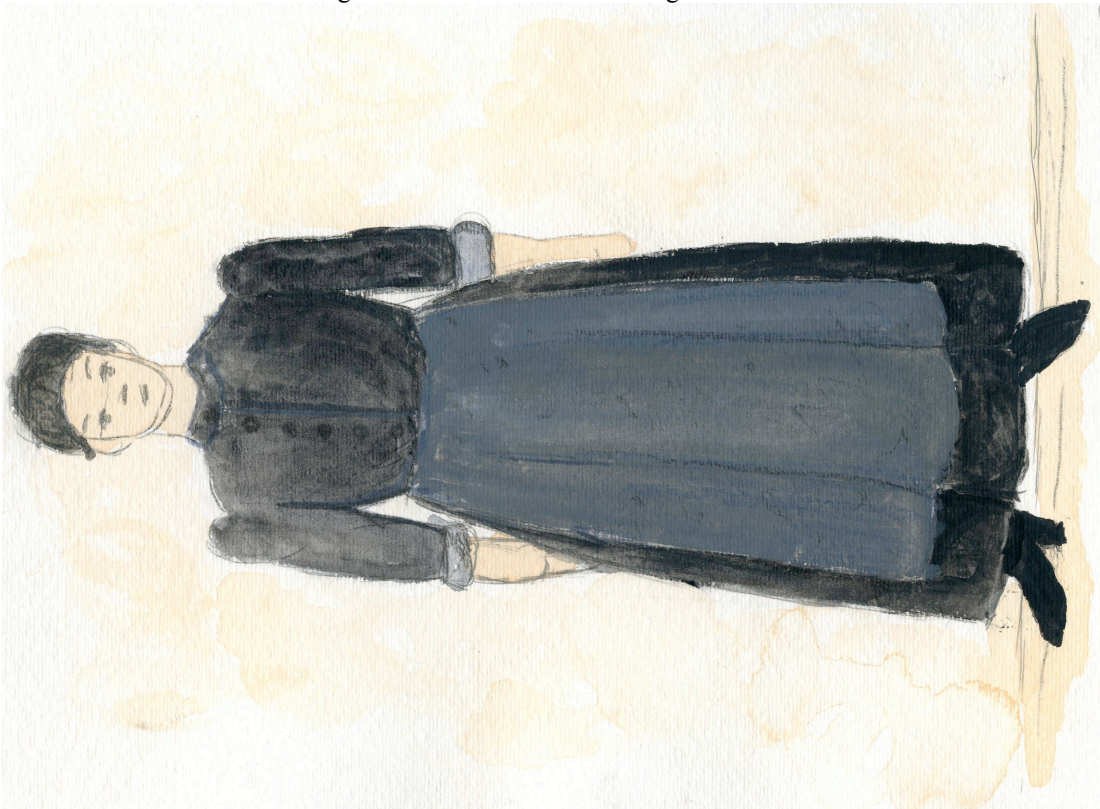


Figure 7.1 Water Color Rendering of Servant



Figure 8.1 Water Color Rendering of Maria Josefa in Wedding Dress



Figure 8.2 Water Color Rendering of Maria Josefa in Night Gown



Figure 9.1 Water Color Rendering of Adela in Green Dress



Figure 9.2 Water Color Rendering of Adela in Underwear

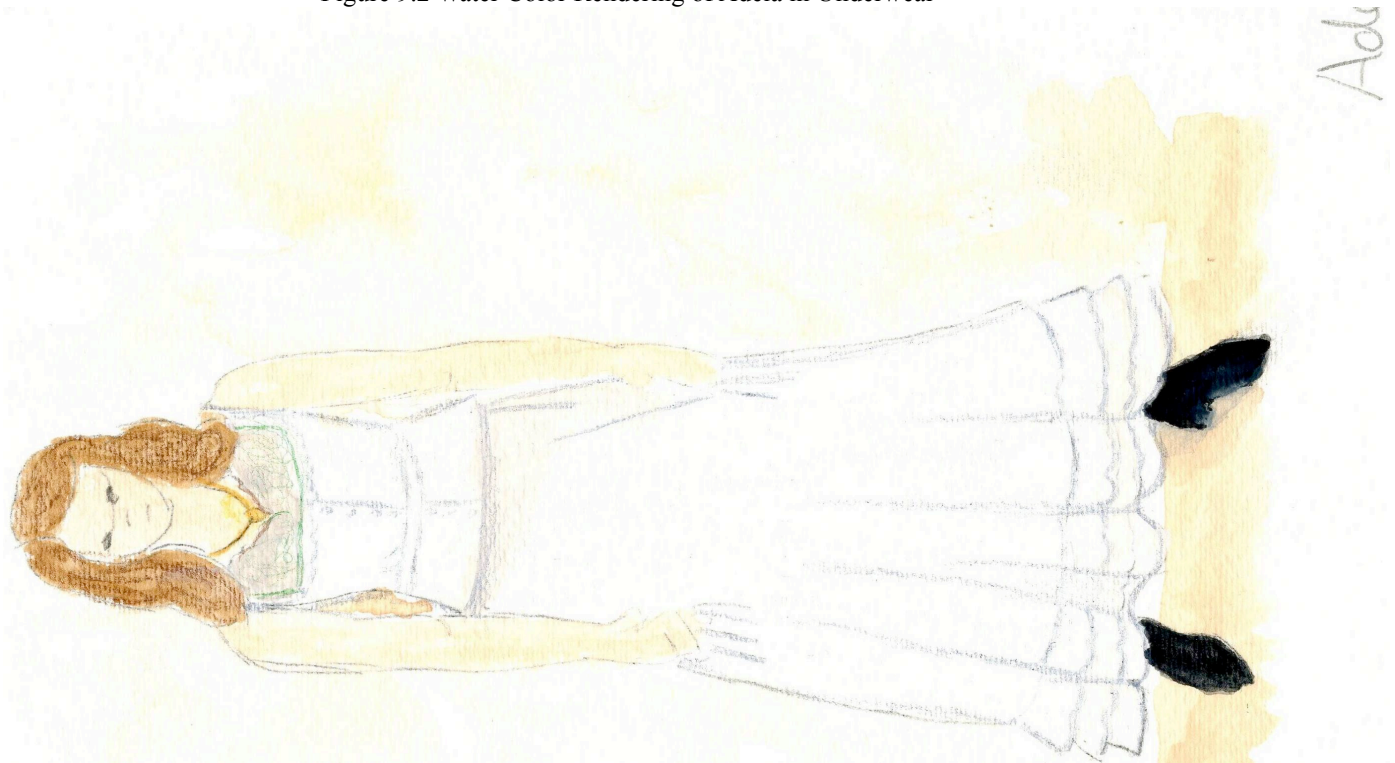


Figure 9.3 Water Color Rendering of Adela in Mourning Dress



Figure 10.1 Water Color Rendering of Prudencia



Figure 11.1 Water Color Rendering of Beggar

